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ABSTRACT

When families take part in their young children's education programs, children do better in school. Many early childhood programs offer families the opportunity to participate in their children's learning through family resource centers. Family resource centers provide information on raising and educating children, along with ideas on how to work with children's teachers, volunteer in the classroom, and support children's learning at home. They are also places to meet other families and work together to improve schools. This issue of the "Early Childhood Digest" describes family resource centers and how they can help families get their children ready for school. The digest discusses characteristics of family resource centers, including that they: (1) make families feel welcome; (2) are places to get information; (3) are places to take classes; (4) help families meet other families and share stories about raising children; (5) support families by making many services easier to get; (6) offer the family support for a long time; and (7) can help parents work together to improve schools. The digest then discusses how parents can get involved in family resource centers, guiding parents through the steps of finding the family resource center, exploring its activities, and volunteering. (EV)

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National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education

Early Childhood Digest:

Family Resource Centers: Where School Readiness Happens

ED 424 939

October 1998

What is a Family Resource Center?

When families take part in their young children's education programs, children do better in school. Many early childhood programs offer you the opportunity to participate in your child's learning from the very beginning. Often, these programs reach out to you through family resource centers. Family resource centers are places where you can get information on raising and educating your child. Your child does not have to be involved in an early childhood program for you to participate in a family resource center. However, they are places where you can get ideas about how to work with your child's teacher, volunteer in the classroom, and support your child's learning at home. They are also places to meet other families and work together to improve schools. This issue of the *Early Childhood Digest* describes family resource centers and how they can help you get your child ready for school. Family resource centers are not all alike and the services they offer may vary across the country. However, most family resource centers

- *will make you feel welcome*. They are places that want to help you get involved in your child's learning. They give you the opportunity to develop family activities that reflect the culture and language of your own family and other families in the community. Often, parents like these centers because staff listen to them and value their ideas.

- *are places to get information*. Most family resource centers provide written materials on topics such as discipline, health and nutrition, and child care. They also share important information about your child's education. For example, one pre-kindergarten program invites parents to attend workshops where the parents use the same materials as their child. Parents finger-paint, play with play dough, and use blocks to understand how these activities help children problem-solve and be creative.

- *are places to take classes*. They offer parenting classes on such topics as coping with stress, how to handle your two-year-old, and healthy meal planning. They can also help you get a high school equivalency certificate. It is very important for your children's learning that they know how much you value your own education. They help you find, and sometimes pay for, child care while you attend classes.

- *help you meet other parents and share your stories about raising children*. Some centers organize family events like "Dads and Tots," or family picnics. These give parents a chance to meet and share parenting stories, as well as make new friends.

- *support families by making many services easier to get*. Some schools work with other agencies in the community to improve children's growth and learning and to help families solve problems. They use the family resource center as a place to offer families health and social services. Children need to be healthy to learn. Some centers help families get food stamps so that children can eat properly and stay healthy. Some family resource centers help you work with doctors to be sure that your children are immunized and that they have regular well-child check-ups. Some centers offer you the chance to get more education and job training skills. These centers help families who are eligible for services as well as those who are not.

- *offer your family support for a long time*. Family resource centers usually are located in the schools your child will attend. Therefore, they get to know your family when your children are young, and help you as your children go through the school. Since resource center staff know your family, when you come to them with concerns, they can find the best solutions for *your* family.

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- *can help parents work together to improve schools.* Resource centers are places where parents can meet not only to share information with each other but to organize efforts to make their children's school better. Center staff can provide helpful information and suggestions about how parents can take action to change school policies that affect their children. For example, parents at one preschool did not like their children sleeping on the floor at nap time. Enough parents got together that the school listened to their concerns and purchased cots for the children.

How Can Parents Get Involved in Family Resource Centers?

To help your child get ready for school, you need to find out what resources are available in your community. You need to go to your family resource center and ask what they do and how you can become involved. Here are some suggestions for your involvement in a family resource center:

- Locate the family resource center in your community. Usually, family resource centers are located in public schools or community centers. Call your local library and they can tell you where to find the family resource center in your community. Other places to look are early childhood programs, schools, community colleges, or family-centered organizations.

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds parent training and information centers, as well as community resource centers that can help families of children with disabilities.

- Find out what activities they offer. Usually, centers offer a range of activities from workshops to "drop-in" play times to picnics. Go to whatever events interest *you*.

- You and your children can drop in at the center during the day. Your children can play with other children while you talk to the other parents about what they learn and do at the center. You can also get ideas from other parents about how you can help your child learn at home and at school.

- Family resource centers need plenty of help—everything from mailing monthly calendars to teaching workshops to providing child care so parents can attend classes. If you have time, find out what you can do to help. Anything you offer will be appreciated because family resource centers know how busy families can get and how much it means to spend some time volunteering.

- Think about what activities would be best for your family and your friends. If the center doesn't offer them, ask. It is *your* resource center and you need to help it find ways to help *your* family.

When families, school, and communities work together, children succeed. Family resource centers are places where families, schools, and communities can come together to help children get ready for school. Remember— a group of families has a larger voice than one individual family. Let the family resource center in your community help you organize parents to make schools better for your children.

This issue of *Early Childhood Digest* was written by Priscilla M.D. Little of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) and based on HFRP materials, including *Paths to School Readiness* and *Early Childhood Reform in 7 Communities*. For copies of these publications, please write to HFRP at 38 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, call us at 617-495-9108, or visit our web site, http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~hfrp.

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